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Stones with character: animism, agency and megalithic monuments

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Abstract

Recent studies of megalithic monuments have shown how they incorporate blocks, sometimes taken from different locations, which link the monuments to features of their local landscapes. The slabs were often left unworked, or only minimally shaped, which would have helped preserved the visual resemblance of the stones to the outcrops or boulder fields from which they were derived. The careful selection of megalithic blocks suggests that they incorporated and materialised memories, powers and associations of place. The recycling of carved and shaped standing stones in the passage graves of Brittany illustrates another approach to the materiality of the slabs, one which draws upon anthropomorphic symbolism. Some later monuments too have carved motifs, and those motifs may imply they were thought to embody 'human' qualities. An 'animistic' or 'anthropomorphic' reading of these blocks may provide additional insights into the social practices and beliefs which lay behind the construction of megalithic monuments.

Prologue: the Mont de la Ville

In August 1785, soldiers levelling land for a parade ground on the island of Jersey discovered the megalithic tomb of the Mont de la Ville (Conway 1787; Molesworth 1787). This unusual monument consisted of a covered passage leading to a circular space surrounded by a series of burial cells, each with its own capstone; opinion is still divided as to whether the chamber as a whole was originally roofed. The Mont de la Ville holds a distinctive place in the history of British megalithic monuments. Soon after its discovery it was donated by grateful islanders to the Governor of Jersey, Field Marshal Henry Seymour Conway, who in 1788 dismantled it and shipped the stones to England. There they were re-erected (with some local additions) in the grounds of his country house at Park Place, Henley-on-Thames (Hibbs 1985). Fortunately, a plan and at least one scale model of the monument had been made before it was moved, and the model probably provided the basis for the watercolour sketch by Francis Grose now in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries of London (Sebire 2005, 25 & plate 2) (Fig. 1). The intriguing feature of this watercolour is the different varieties of stone that are identified: the majority of them are coloured brown on the sketch, whereas others are shown a dark grey-green and one a knobbly white. These distinctions correspond fairly closely with the petrological determinations made at the reconstructed Mont de la Ville in 1962. Most of the blocks are of Fort Regent granite, the bedrock of the hill on which the tomb was built. The dark grey-green in the 18th century watercolour represents coarse porphyritic granite and diorite, while the stone shown as white and knobbly was described in the recent study as "curiously sea-rounded" (Mourant 1963).

With the exception of Stonehenge, where the mixture of sarsens and bluestones was noted by Edmund Halley as early as 1720 (Chippindale 1994, 79), the Mont de la Ville is perhaps the earliest recorded instance where a megalithic monument was recognised to combine materials of different geological origin. Despite their variety, however, all the materials used were of local origin: the most distant sources are only half a mile or so from the site (Mourant 1963). The blocks may have been quarried from outcrops or exposures; others perhaps were lying already detached on the

surface. Yet although the stone sources lay close to hand, some were more easily moved than others. The water-worn character of capstone 53, for example, suggests that it came from the foreshore. Considerable effort would have been required to drag this block from the beach to the hilltop site, 50 metres above sea level, on which the Mont de la Ville was built.

Stones and their sources

The incorporation of stone slabs from different sources is now a recognised feature of many of the megalithic tombs of western Europe (e.g. Kalb 1996; Mohen & Scarre 2002; Giot *et al.* 1995). In some cases, the mechanical properties of different kinds of stone may have been the guiding factor. At Bougon in western France, for example, the coarse but strong Oxfordian limestone was selected for the capstones, the more brittle but more easily worked Callovian for the uprights (Cariou *in* Mohen & Scarre 2002, 162). In other cases, however, the choice of stone appears not to be dependent on mechanical considerations, and other explanations must be invoked. Capstone 53 at the Mont de la Ville may have been singled out because of its distinctive appearance. It is important to note that the megalithic slabs used in these monuments came invariably not from deep quarries but from cliffs, outcrops or boulder fields that were visible and prominent elements of the landscape. This was not merely convenient building material, but part of the visible landscape whose removal would in some cases have left enduring scars on well-known surfaces.

Ethnography suggests that prominent landscape features were invested with special significance by prehistoric communities, as sites of mythological or sacred importance. Such beliefs derive in part from a desire to explain the origin of features of the natural world. The prominent massif of Uluru in central Australia, for example, is associated with several 'dreamtime' narratives that relate specific features to the activities of named creator beings. Thus the boulders on its summit are the petrified bodies of two boys who engaged in a mud fight, while the deep scars down its sides are traces of a battle between the Liru (poisonous snakes) and Kuniya (carpet snakes) (Layton 1986, 5-16). Within these contexts, stone has often a special significance. In central Madagascar, the stones and boulders that litter the countryside are held to be the debris of a battle between the earth and the sky (Kus & Raharijoana 1998). The Maloh of Sarawak consider it a potential receptacle for spirits and pay particular attention to those stones that have the recognisable form of a human being or animal. Large stones are associated with mythological explanations and may become objects of worship, isolated rocks and outcrops being considered especially significant (King 1976). Nor are such beliefs peculiar to non-European societies. In Slovenia and Croatia, oral tradition identifies naturally shaped monoliths with female beings of religious or supernatural power (Hrobat 2007, 41-43).

It can be argued that by taking megalithic blocks from places such as these, the significance and power of their symbolic or supernatural associations was also appropriated. The colour, shape and texture of the blocks will have provided visual clues to their origin, and may have been sufficient to connect them at once to particular places within the landscape.

The matching of megalithic slabs to their sources can often be visually striking. An illustration is provided by the Anta da Lajinha, a megalithic tomb in inland Portugal,

some 25kms north of the River Tagus (Scarre forthcoming). The monument consists of a sub-rectangular chamber 1m x 1.2m across entered by a passage on its eastern side. The passage appears to have been intentionally demolished, perhaps when the monument went out of use, and the chamber has suffered from more recent depredations, only two of the original eight orthostats surviving in a reasonably complete condition. These surviving orthostats are weathered schist slabs, which retain the grey-green scalar appearance of the outcrops from which they were derived.

The Anta da Lajinha is located in an area of schists where the availability of large stone slabs is strictly limited. The bedrock directly beneath the monument is a fissured and fractured schist which furnishes only small cobble-sized blocks. The orthostats differ from this local bedrock in colour, size and texture. The sources of the large slabs are, however, readily visible in the surrounding landscape, where several series of pillar-like outcrops traverse the steep hillsides in prominent rows. Individual outcrops measure up to 2m tall and constitute natural monuments in themselves. A particularly striking series occurs 200m east of Lajinha, and their appearance matches closely the blocks used in the Anta da Lajinha (Fig. 2). Pragmatists might argue that these are the only available sources of large blocks in the vicinity, but the striking visual appearance of the rows of outcrops suggests that other considerations may also have been involved. In short, the builders of the tomb may have taken blocks from significant places that were already invested with special meanings and associations.

The Lajinha orthostats were minimally shaped, if at all, a characteristic that they share with many west European megaliths. Unworked blocks are a feature of monuments from the chambered tombs of the North European plain, constructed of split glacial erratics, to the *antas* of the Portuguese Alentejo, built of granite blocks detached from outcrops through processes of natural erosion (Scarre 2004; Vortisch 1999). In Britain, the 'brute stone' nature of megalithic monuments was highlighted by 19th and early 20th century writers. Peet, indeed, defined a megalithic monument as "usually, though not quite invariably, made of large blocks of unworked or slightly worked stone" (Peet 1912, 2). The significance of this unshaped appearance, however, has only recently begun to be addressed in studies that focus on the colour, texture and symbolism of the blocks. It is clear that by preserving their original appearance, by leaving them unshaped, a direct visual link was established with the sources of the slabs. If those sources were already considered places of power in the landscape, the use of largely unworked blocks may have been a means of visibly appropriating those powers of place.

Shapes and shoulders

It must be recognised, however, that not all megalithic slabs were left unshaped. Some were painstakingly pecked and smoothed to give a highly specific form or outline. Others were embellished through the addition of carved or engraved motifs. Indeed, the very earliest megalithic monuments in western Europe appear to fall into this tradition. These are standing stones of north-west France, systematically felled and incorporated into passage graves during the later 5th millennium or early 4th millennium BC. It is clear, however, that they were originally erected in the open air during the 5th millennium BC (Scarre 2007). Far from being 'brute' blocks, these stones appear to have been fashioned specifically to evoke elements of the human form.

A good example is provided by the decorated stone immediately inside the entrance to the Ile Longue passage grave (Péquart *et al.* 1927, pl. 65, 66) (Fig. 3a). The principal motif is a deeply carved outline, rectangular in its lower part and surmounted by a domed top culminating in a protruding apex, fringed by wavy lines. Most observers have thought this a depiction of a human face, with the loops to either side representing ears, and the wavy lines the hair (Cassen 2000, 659-660). The interpretation is seductive, even though a recent alternative argues that what is depicted here is in fact not a human head with ears and wavy hair but a male penis flanked by testicles and fringed by pubic hair (Cassen 2000, 668ff). What unites these divergent interpretations is the notion that the representation is in some way anthropomorphic.

Other reused stones derive their anthropomorphic character not from motifs carved into their surfaces but from their overall shape. These typically have ‘shoulders’ that serve to distinguish a schematic protruding ‘head’ and so create a recognisably human outline. The most striking example is the massive floor slab of passage grave II in the Petit Mont cairn overlooking the entrance to the Gulf of Morbihan (Fig. 3b). There are no carvings on the visible surface of the stone, although the underside remains hidden from view, since it currently forms the floorstone of the chamber. Indeed, it appears to have been placed in position before the chamber walls were built around it. Other smaller anthropomorphic menhirs are built into the side walls of the two surviving Petit Mont passage graves (Lecornec 1994; L’Helgouach 1997). Still smaller in scale but still potentially anthropomorphic are the ‘shouldered’ stones within the Ile Guennoc passage graves (Fig. 3c), though these have been modified only in their upper part, to distinguish the shoulders and the head (Le Roux 1998, 219).

The practice of shaping stones to an anthropomorphic form may have been complemented by the use of unmodified, naturally ‘shouldered’ stones that were specially selected for their suggestive profile, and interpreted anthropomorphically (L’Helgouach 1997, 118). There is the risk, of course, that we may attribute human significance to stones in which prehistoric observers may have remarked no anthropomorphic features. Equally, it is important to recognise that stones need have no resemblance to the human form in order to represent humans. The identification of standing stones with people is a feature of numerous folk tales in Britain and Brittany (see e.g. Burl 2000) and relates both to the ‘mystery’ of megalithic structures – inviting mythological and often moralising explanations – and to the general shape of the stones: frequently tall and narrow, and easily visualised as petrified individuals. The Merry Maidens stone circle in Cornwall takes its name from the tradition that young girls were turned to stone in punishment for dancing on the Sabbath (Hunt 1865); while the stone rows of Carnac were thought to be Roman soldiers petrified in their pursuit of the fleeing Saint Cornély (Mérimée 1836). These folklore traditions may be of recent origin and need have little to do with the original meaning of the stones, but they highlight the power of anthropomorphism, the attribution of human qualities to animate and inanimate objects which is a pervasive feature of human perception (Guthrie 1993). Such anthropomorphism includes, notably, the widespread tendency to interpret stones of certain shapes and sizes in ‘human’ terms.

Gendered slabs and body parts

Standing stones may hence in some, and perhaps many, cases represent people. It must be observed, however, that only a minority of them incorporate active representations of the human form. That they only rarely chose to do so may reveal a more nuanced relationship between form and material than the simple imposition of a human image on a block of stone. There may indeed have been an important dialectic between carver and raw material which made the latter much more than simply a canvas or support for the particular shape or motif.

However ambiguously, the stones we have described were representing complete human forms. During the 4th millennium BC, by contrast, a new tradition of body part carvings arose across northern France: pairs of rounded protuberances carved in raised relief that are commonly identified as female breasts.

Paired breasts, often accompanied by necklaces, are found in a series of different contexts in the Seine basin, downstream of Paris, in the Marne valley, and in northern and western Brittany (Villes 1998). In some cases these breasts may be the sole surviving remains of more complete human figures that were originally marked on the stones in paint or charcoal. Charcoal motifs survive in the rock-cut tombs of the Marne. In one case (Razet 23) an axe blade has been added in black charcoal to an axe haft carved in low relief. In the same tomb, the central bead on the necklace worn by an anthropomorphic image still shows traces of yellow colouring (Shee Twohig 1981, 196-198; Villes 1998). It is hence clear that some figures were composite – carved partly in relief and partly outlined in charcoal or paint, although only in the protected context of the Marne rock-cut tombs have the fragile traces of such drawing or colouring been preserved. Similar painted decoration may once have been widespread in the megalithic tombs of Atlantic Europe (Devignes 1997).

In two of the Marne tombs, paired female breasts form part of a complete human figure carved in outline into the chalk. In other contexts – in the Late Neolithic megalithic tombs of the Seine valley and Brittany – the representations are, with one exception, limited to a pair of breasts alone. The only associated feature is a multi-strand necklace depicted above the breasts, as if hanging from a hidden neck. In the one exception, where face, breasts and necklace appear together, the composition appears in fact to consist of three grouped but dissociated elements (breasts, necklace, face) rather than a unified representation of the human form (Villes 1998; Shee Twohig 1981, 195-196, fig. 188). In every other instance, the breasts depicted in the megalithic tombs (unlike those in the Marne rock-cut tombs) seem to be disembodied elements of human anatomy.

This becomes clear when we consider the examples in Brittany. At Prajou-Menhir, two pairs of breasts, side by side, are carved within sunken cartouches that make it difficult to see how they could ever have been parts of complete female figures. The motifs are placed too close together and leave insufficient space for human outlines to have been incised or painted around them. Published diagrams obscure these relationships by illustrating the breasts as disembodied motifs, rather than showing them within the context of the stone as a whole (e.g. L'Helgouach 1966, 324; Shee Twohig 1981, figs.152-153). Pairs of breasts carved tightly side by side are found also at Tressé (L'Helgouach *et al.* 1970), and at Kergüntuil, where no fewer than six pairs in line occupy the central space of one orthostat, with two more on an adjacent slab (Shee Twohig 1981, fig.151) (Fig. 4). The point is driven home at Mougau-Bihan,

where the second orthostat on the left has two pairs of breasts carved, not side by side, but one above the other (Shee Twohig 1981, fig.156). While we cannot be certain that the two sets of Mougau-Bihan carvings are contemporary, it underlines the contention that paired female breasts are not the surviving parts of complete human figures.

The obvious sexuality of these motifs differentiates them from the earlier series of shaped and carved stones. Another distinguishing feature is their *in situ* character. The earlier stones are re-cycled menhirs, standing stones that had been felled, sometimes even fragmented, before being brought into the tombs. By contrast, there is no evidence that these later breasts were carved on stones that had originally been free-standing menhirs. They are integral features of the funerary space.

What is the significance of these disembodied anatomical elements? Do the breasts stand, in some sense, for complete bodies? Or was their carving undertaken in order to imbue these megalithic slabs with desired anthropomorphic properties? The stones on which they are carved are broad, squared blocks, not noticeably anthropomorphic in their general shape. Since only parts of whole bodies are represented, it might be logical to conclude that only a restricted set of human attributes – those connected with these particular anatomical elements – are being evoked. Thus breasts may have been carved in order to draw out and emphasise feminine qualities that were considered to lie within the granite blocks. Breasts also carry associations of nurturing and feeding, and their presence in a funerary context may have been connected with cycles of death and rebirth (cf. Hodder 1990, 242; Bloch & Parry 1982; Thomas & Tilley 1993, 316). Marija Gimbutas saw them as a manifestation of her Neolithic Goddess religion. We do not need to accept her speculative religious scenario in order to take seriously her contention that, in the megalithic tombs of northwest France, “[t]he breasts are not nourishing the living alone; more importantly, they are regenerating the dead” (Gimbutas 1989, 40-41).

Agency and animism

In a much-quoted study, Alfred Gell drew attention to the way in which inanimate objects, notably ‘idols’, are considered to possess animacy and agency by those who worship them. He observed that supposedly aniconic religious objects are often locally interpreted in ‘iconic’ ways, but that added anthropomorphic features “do not just serve the purpose of making [it] a more realistic ‘depiction’ of a human being, they render it more spiritual, more inward, by opening up routes of access to this inwardness” (Gell 1998, 131-132). The ‘features’ to which he is here referring are orifices such as eyes, mouth or ears. It is striking that these are the very features which are lacking from most of the Neolithic representations in France and the western Alps, where emphasis is given instead to breasts (where female), dress (belts or patterned clothing), prestige artefacts (notably axes and daggers) and occasionally hair. Yet this does not detract from the possibility that the anthropomorphic motifs were carved on these stones specifically to endow them with agency. Was that agency brought into being only by the act of carving, or did the motif merely strengthen and make manifest a quality of agency that was already immanent in the block before it was carved?

It is here that the distinction between statue-menhirs and disembodied body parts becomes intriguing. In explaining the agency of idols, Gell provides several

descriptions of the actions or ceremonies by which images (which may be only vaguely anthropomorphic in their basic form) can be consecrated, brought to life or renewed (Gell 1998, 144-153). He does not ignore the importance of the material from which they are made; yet his emphasis is on the activation of the image, rather than the power of the material from which it is made.

In the case of the gendered megalithic slabs of northern France, the kind of agency discussed by Gell presents one route to understanding the significance of the motifs. The addition of breasts may have been thought to bring the stones alive in some way. Yet the aniconic nature of the slabs on which they were carved, the presence of disembodied human features, and the fact that very few of the slabs which make up these tombs are decorated in this way, together suggest that the imagery itself is only a clue to a deeper meaning. We have already mentioned the power and prevalence of anthropomorphism – the tendency to ‘humanise’ objects in the world around us. An earlier generation of anthropologists might have invoked the concept of ‘animism’, the idea “that all nature is possessed, pervaded, crowded, with spiritual beings” (Tylor 1871, 271). More recent studies have redefined animism as the anthropomorphisation of apparently inanimate things (along with animate plants and animals) in the specific sense of social interaction (Bird-David 1999). The significance of animism has been only tangentially considered in recent archaeological research. There is indeed a major methodological problem, since the attribution of life to an inanimate object would be difficult to determine unless that object were modified in some way. Perhaps here, in the megalithic tombs of northern France, the disembodied female breasts provide evidence of just such a belief: in the animistic powers of nurturing incorporated within these particular megalithic slabs. This is to suggest that we regard these motifs not simply as images carved in convenient or appropriate locations on the canvas of the block, but as making manifest some crucial aspect of the character or personality of the block itself.

Conclusions

For over two centuries, there has been awareness that some megalithic monuments combine a variety of stone types within their structure, and hence draw on material from a number of distinct sources. This was clearly intentional on the part of the builders, and suggests that the stones or their sources held special significance. Furthermore, the stones that were used usually preserve enough of their original surface appearance to provide a direct visual link with the cliffs, outcrops or boulder fields from which they had been taken. This is made evident by properties of shape and colour, texture and weathering. Megalithic blocks are essentially recognisable fragments of landscape dismantled and reconfigured within a cultural construct.

Ethnography reminds us that for traditional peoples, landscapes are full of places of meaning and power. Thus Boas remarks that for the Tsimshian on the Northwest coast of North America, “All nature, the heavenly bodies, rocks and islands, waterfalls, animals, and plants are beings of supernatural power whom a man can approach with prayer, whose help he can ask, and to whom he may express his thanks” (Boas 1966, 155). Similarly in Africa, “[m]ountains, rock faces, caves, pools, waterfalls, rapids, hot springs, dense forests and large trees all seem to have the potential to engage the human imagination and become imbued with sacred authority” (Colson 1997, 49).

Within this context, stone is often a material of special significance, and rocks, cliffs and outcrops feature prominently among the 'places of power' in these landscapes.

The key feature of megalithic blocks is their size, and it is by their size that they communicate power and fix the attention. Considerable effort was required to drag them and raise them into position. Those engaged in the work will have acquired a close, arduous and perhaps painful familiarity with the unique features of every block. Each stone will have had its biography, and stories of these heroic feats of construction were no doubt passed down through the generations. Yet the meaning of the stones went beyond this. Mircea Eliade emphasised the cross-cultural 'power' that stones exercise on the human imagination, observing that "[m]en have always adored stones simply in as much as they represent something *other* than themselves" (Eliade 1949, 216). Eliade saw those stones that are associated with burial as serving as a prison or dwelling for the souls of the dead, who might otherwise trouble the living (Eliade 1949, 219). It is clear that among many traditional societies, individual stones are considered to enclose human-like identities or life-forces.

This provides a challenging perspective through which to understand the use of megalithic blocks in Neolithic western Europe. Were these blocks considered to contain forces or qualities that were conceptualized partly in anthropomorphic terms? In some cases, it may have been those special qualities that were made manifest through shaping or the addition of carvings. Such modifications would have accentuated the active character of the block; but the scarcity of more naturalistic human representations indicates that it was felt sufficient merely to suggest. The 'gendered' slabs of Late Neolithic northern France provide one example of the process and are particularly significant in that they represent not whole human forms but specific body parts, notably female breasts. It is possible that they do not stand for people, or for personified forces, but for the particular quality of nurturing.

Were unshaped and uncarved blocks too regarded as symbolically charged repositories of animacy and agency? A measure of support for this comes from the fact that they connected with the landscape in a very visible way – through their size and appearance – and hence linked directly with places that may have been considered the abode of particular powers. We should also note the effective elision, or continuity of representation, between the unmodified blocks with human-like form or features that were sometimes selected for these monuments, and blocks where such an identification is rendered progressively less ambiguous by the working of shoulders or the addition of specific human attributes. It may be misleading to draw a sharp distinction between those stones which to our eyes are clearly anthropomorphic, and those which are not. It is the carving and shaping of megalithic blocks, however, that suggests most clearly that they may have been endowed with human-like qualities, or that the powers they incorporated were thought of in at least partly human terms. That in turn implies that they possessed agency, the perceived ability to act upon and interact with the world of the living. It is important, of course, to avoid conjuring up a Neolithic theophany of gods and goddesses. Nor should we expect a uniformity of belief and practice through time and space; the very variability of megalithic monuments precludes any such generalization. Nonetheless, the possibility exists that some of these stones relate to a world of animistic powers that were conceptualised in human form.

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Captions to illustrations

Fig. 1. Le Mont de la Ville, Jersey: (above) watercolour by Francis Grose indicating the varying petrologies of the stones c.1788: waterworn stone 53 is the distinctive white capstone towards the rear at the left hand side of this sketch; (below) plan of the monument as rebuilt at Henley-on-Thames, showing petrological identifications by Arthur Maurant (after Maurant 1963)

Fig. 2. Anta da Lajinha, Portugal: (top) surviving schist slabs at the rear of the burial chamber; (middle) location of tomb in relation to nearby outcrops of columnar schist; (bottom) schist outcrop

Fig. 3. Anthropomorphic slabs from Neolithic chambered tombs in Brittany: (a) Ile Longue; (b) Petit Mont, chamber II floorstone; (c) Ile Guennoc cairn III chamber C (a after Péquart *et al.* 1927; b & c after L'Helgouach 1993)

Fig. 4. Row of breast motifs in raised relief within allée couverte of Kergüntuil (photo: Chris Scarre)